



A Blue Green Christmas

Story and Photos by SFC Brenda Benner

EVERY year at this time, camouflage-clad soldiers and airmen from the Texas Army and Air National Guard help the Austin Police Department bring holiday cheer to families in need.

“Operation Blue Santa” provides Christmas dinners and gifts for families needing help during the holidays. And although the name refers to police blue, from the beginning the program has been supported by Army green.

Margarine Beaman, a Blue Santa board member and longtime volunteer, said the yearly event is vibrant and growing, and that’s a good thing considering the increasing needs of families in the Austin area.

“We’re lucky to have volunteers from throughout the community,” Beaman said. “Without the Texas National Guard, this could never happen. They take care of our building repairs, pick up the donations, and are especially vital to our huge delivery day. Last year, thanks to their efforts, we accomplished 3,640 deliveries.”

When delivery day comes again this year, it will once again resemble a military deployment as rows and rows

of camouflaged trucks and Humvees convoy out from Blue Santa headquarters. The military delivery force is necessary because most police cars, fire trucks and their crews must be ready to answer emergencies.

In some cases, the Blue Santa program is the only gift-giving aspect of Christmas families living at the poverty level will have, said SGT Orvin Lee, of Company A, 449th Aviation Support Battalion, who’s been helping to deliver that Christmas for several years. He does it for the joy he experiences when helping others, he said, and many other soldiers in his unit are hooked on the program and show up in full force every year.

The roar of the diesel engine from Lee’s truck is enough to excite children half a block away. Some of them run from house to house, hoping to get a peek at what Blue Santa has in store for them when his huge Army “sleigh” arrives at their front door.

From the first delivery to the last, the children’s responses are the only proof soldiers need to know their efforts are appreciated, Lee said.

SFC Linda Varda, a combat medic and Emergency Medical Technician instructor, is a 12-year volunteer. She

(Top left) Operation Blue Santa provides holiday gifts to many children who might not otherwise receive any.

(Top right) SGT Orvin Lee treats a child to the view from his 2 1/2 ton Army “sleigh.”

(Above) SGT Meva Brandon loads his truck for a second round of deliveries.

said that the reactions she receives range from open-armed greetings from eager children to tears of gratitude from their thankful parents.

Varda said she still enjoys making the deliveries as much as she did the very first year she volunteered.

“Every time I do this, it reminds me that at some time in our lives, almost everybody needs a little help,” she said. “This is a way for me to share some of the good fortune and blessings I’ve received when I’ve needed help.”

Volunteers from various organizations including the National Guard have to work throughout the year to make Blue Santa the success that it is.

“We have a core group of members involved year-round to make the program a success,” said Texas Adjutant General Daniel James. “Add our donation sorting, wrapping, and delivery forces, and you see we are an organization that demonstrates a full commitment to Blue Santa, a commitment to support our community.” □

SFC Brenda Benner works for the Texas Army Guard’s 100th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment.